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J-Horror : A discourse in cross-cultural communication and cinematic hybridity

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ABSTRACT

J-HORROR: A DISCOURSE IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CINEMATIC HYBRIDITY

by
MaryLou Quillen

Film visually communicates the idea of culture, leaving interpretation open to an impressionable audience. Though a genre's recognizable iconography can transcend boundaries, understanding a film's intended message still requires a certain amount of foreknowledge. J-Horror, the common term for Japanese horror among fans, is a sub-genre of Horror that has been catapulted into Hollywood's limelight due to adaptations such as *The Ring* (2002). Based upon a novel, *Ringu*, by Koji Suzuki and Nakata Hideo's 1998 cinematic creation of the same name, Gore Verbinski adapted the terrifying plot for Western audiences in his 2002 counterpart.

With the cross-cultural transition, certain aspects of the premise and characters were changed. I posit these differences are more than artistic reinterpretation, and are culturally significant. However, while certain facets of fear are culturally specific, the horror film serves as a universalizing tool of communication, surpassing cultural boundaries.

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by
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To my family,
for their patience, love and support

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INTRODUCTION

> But what if, in our modernized world that has created skyscrapers, middle classes, and office workers where only farmers or factory workers labored before, cultural practices now matter much less than individual character? With the world connected by Internet, TV, and telephone; with Toyota sedans in the middle-class driveways of Asia, Starbucks and TGIFriday's in Jakarta, Pret A Manger counters in Tokyo, Thai restaurants in Milwaukee and Raleigh, sushi in the American heartland, and McDonald's and KFCs absolutely everywhere, how different are we really? (Prasso 22)

Marshall McLuhan foresaw a 'global village' through the interconnectedness of technology and media, and the fruition of this vision has transitioned into a plethora of new stimuli. Modern-day existence offers a palette rich in cultural diversity. The boundaries of curiosity and intrigue have blurred into fascination and imitation. Perhaps the most obvious example of cultural adaptation has occurred between the East and the West. Once a stark contrast of ancient temples and concrete jungles, now the differences seem to be slipping away into aestheticism rather than perspective, breeding a certain sense of homogeny. The implications of this hybridity of culture provoke a new question: "How different are we really?"

In this state of global consciousness, technology has emerged as the unifying factor, surpassing the human divisions of race, creed and nationality. As O.B. Hardison, Jr. says, "A horizon of invisibility cuts across the geography of modern culture" (5). This

esoteric sense of existence is made more tangible by the practical aspects of human interaction and communication. While we are able to enjoy the products and art of an international community, we may not always be aware of the cultural implications that come with substantially different worldviews.

> The terms 'international,' 'transnational' and 'global' communication not only stand for different definitions of an expanding communication space but also reflect the history of worldwide communication as well as its diversity. Global communication gives us an eyewitness view of events in remotest locations, we participate in political discourses of global, regional or even local relevance. These global processes, in which knowledge, values and ethics, aesthetics, lifestyles are exchanged, is becoming autonomous, a 'third culture', a generative frame of unity within which diversity can take place. (Featherstone 2)

Technology, via the medium of telephone, Internet or video, has afforded us the privilege of easily accessible information about other cultures on the other side of the world. Arguably the strongest conveyer of social knowledge for the mind's eye is the life-like medium of film. Recognizing this potential, Hollywood has remade several of the more popular Japanese horror films, such as *The Ring* (2002) based on *Ringu* (1998), and *The Grudge* (2004) based on *Ju-On* (2003), all of which achieved multimillion-dollar success. This new awareness of Japanese horror has extended attention to the likes of talented directors such as Takashi Miike, who finds innovative ways to shock audiences with films like *Auditon*, and the cult-status director Naoyuki Tomomatsu, who made the apocalyptic schoolgirl zombie film, *Stacy (2001)*. This kind of Western exposure has

heightened curiosity among a new broader audience, as well as raising several questions about the universal emotion of fear. Yet, how was it that this crossover was able to be so successful? And did Western audiences truly understand the complexity of the Japanese plot? This very thought that gives rise to the argument of transcultural communication and cinematic hybridity, culminating in the human question: How different are we really?

Positing film as an "allegory of modernity," Isolde Standish observes that "cinema offered spectators a 'global vernacular' through which, however transitory, to negotiate the contradictions between the experiential realities of modern life (alienation, chaos, physical danger and powerlessness) and the ideological imperatives progress and order" (328). Similar to a mirror's reflection, film is capable of representing reality and manipulating emotion, and, therefore, becomes a very effective tool of communication, regardless of national boundaries. Embracing this notion of "transnationalization," the international film community is fast becoming a "hybridized global aesthetic accessible to all" (Standish 339-40). Specific cultural mores are now accessible for various societies to observe and interpret.

As one of the most widespread media of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, film is not merely entertainment but has become an effective tool of multi-cultural communication on an international level, expounding the possibility of global worldview. In 1922, Vladimir Lenin proclaimed that film had the potential to be the most influential of all arts, according to film scholar Andrew Tudor ("Genre" 3). Film, perhaps more vividly than any other medium, is able to communicate a " widespread common articulation of the beliefs, aspirations, antagonisms, and doubts of the huge populations of modern societies," notes Tudor ("Genre" 13).

Proving to be more substantial than a mere trend, the Asian film industry has gained international momentum in recent years. Part of this is due to the growing interest in film as an artistic medium, and partly, it is due to the exportation of Asian culture across the world. Tales of the Orient have enchanted Western minds for millennia; it is only roughly in this last century that this mystery has begun to unravel.

While Japanese cinema has received acclaim across genres, it seems to particularly flourish in categories such as Action, focusing on the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia, Animation, more widely known as Anime, and Horror (a genre that was drowning in parody).

CHAPTER 2

FILM SYNOPSIS AND ANALYSIS

2.1 *Ringu* and *The Ring*

2.1.1 *Ringu/The Ring:* Film Synopses

"Not since Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs* has a villain with so little screen time captured the public's interest as much as Sadako, Japan's answer to the modern, vengeful ghost" (Lopez). The image of a young girl with long black hair draping over her face, depicting cabalistic mystery and wrathful intent, is perhaps the most daunting and iconic cinematic representation of villainy ever to grace the horror genre. While American audiences are more familiar with this character as Samara, her terrifying image transcends cultural boundaries. However, the physical similarities lend themselves to the superficial side of interpretation, as the basis for Sadako/Samara's existence differs drastically.

Though *Ringu* (Nakata Hideo 1998) and the American adaptation, *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002) are informed by different artistic visions, they share the same basic plot line. Both films open in the classic horror style: a girl, Tomoko/Katie, sharing a secret with her friend, Masami/Becca, about a supposed cursed video that causes you to die within a week of watching it, a threatening phone call that suggests imminent death, and the anxious mood, knowing the ominous event is supposed to take place at any moment. The girl seems scared but is taking it as a highly elaborate hoax based in urban lore, until the phone rings minutes away from the foretold doom. Further solidifying its

connections to the genre, Nakata, as well as Verbinski, provide a typical cheap scare for the horror audience, as the phone call turns out to be her mother. However, the relief is short-lived: as the phone rings a second time, the audience is well aware that the horror is just beginning. The television automatically turns on, providing an eerie backdrop of white noise; water slowly fills the house, as the camera pans voyeuristically, through the Masami/Becca's gaze, leading to the girl's corpse in the closet. Verbinski permits the audience to see Katie's face, distorted beyond recognition, while Nakata relies on the starkness of implication. (See Figure 2.1.1-1. In this and in all subsequent illustrations, the image from the Japanese film *Ringu* will be on the left and the American film *The Ring* will be on the right). Mutually disturbing, the expectation for fear has been established.

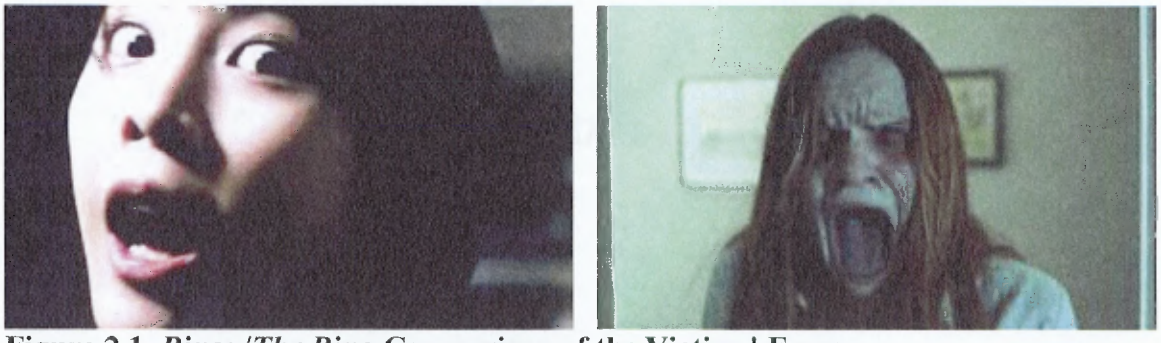

Figure 2.1 *Ringu/The Ring* Comparison of the Victims' Faces.

The dead victim was the niece of a female reporter, Asakawa Reiko in the Japanese version, and Rachel Keller in the American version. Reiko/Rachel starts investigating the bizarre death, quickly learning about the alleged cursed videotape that her niece had viewed while vacationing at a remotely located cabin. Following her inquisitive instincts, she seeks out this alleged videotape and, following the urban legend verbatim, is infected with the *Ring Virus*, though the implications remain ambiguous. In

the American version, Rachel receives a phone call within seconds of viewing the tape, with an eerie voice whispering "Seven days....", while in the Japanese version, Reiko figures out the seven-day deadline through her own research.

Curious yet skeptical, Reiko/Rachel shows the video to the father of her child, Ryuji/Noah, who is a professor at the local university, and whose relational involvement remains unclear. As they look for assistance in understanding the seemingly random and esoteric imagery, the telephone rings, delivering the same dreaded warning. Peculiar happenstances heighten her sense of urgency, including her own son's (Yoichi/Aidan) accidental viewing of the tape, as their investigation reveals the dire reality behind the curse. At this point, the plot lines of the films drastically differ regarding the explanation of Sadako, Samara and the curse.

In *Ringu*, Sadako appears to be the love child of a psychic, Yamamura Shizuko, and a scientific researcher, Ikuma Heihachiro, who is studying Shizuko's telepathic abilities. Though Shizuko had accurately predicted the volcanic eruption of Mount Mihara, the press harangues her for walking out of a public reading. One of the bullying reporters drops dead immediately from a heart attack, as Sadako tries to protect her mother from humiliation and subsequently, her first taste of vengeance. Shortly after, Shizuko commits suicide by throwing herself into a volcano. Sadako then becomes the responsibility of Ikuma, who, wrought with feelings of embarrassment and resentment, throws her down a well, leaving her for dead.

In *The Ring*, Samara Morgan is the adopted daughter of Richard and Anna Morgan, who own a horse farm on a remote island off the Washington State coast. Samara was institutionalized for *projected thermography (nensha)*, meaning she could

burn mental images onto physical surfaces. Along with this ability, Samara never sleeps and shows no remorse for tormenting her mother with nightmares, hinting at her otherworldliness. Due to Samara's effect on her mother, Richard kept her in the barn loft with minimal belongings. Samara turned her energy elsewhere, causing all of the horses on the Morgan ranch to commit mass suicide by drowning themselves in the ocean. Anna suffocates Samara, shoves her down a well, and ends her own life by jumping off a cliff into the ocean.

Reuniting in narrative, Verbinski's *The Ring* follows the rest of Nakata's *Ringu* plot. Racing against time, Reiko/Rachel and Ryuji/Noah frantically search for a possible solution, returning to the original cabin. Sadako/Samara auspiciously leaves them clues, as they discover the well beneath the cabin floor. Reiko/Rachel lowers herself into the well, as Sadako/Samara's corpse floats to the surface, and the protagonist cradles her body, overwhelmed by motherly instincts and hope for resolution. The seven-day deadline mercifully seems to pass for Reiko/Rachel, leading to the assumption that rescuing the remains of the antagonistic Sadako/Samara from the cruelty of her premature death to released them from their own premature fate. Normalcy appears to be restored, which makes the climax all the more shocking. While Reiko/Rachel returns to her son, somewhat relieved, Ryuji/Noah returns to his study, further investigating some of the information. Suddenly, the television turns on, to what looks like static, though upon closer examination, he can see a figure moving in the center of the screen. As the figure becomes larger, it is identifiably Sadako/Samara crawling out of the well, and seemingly moving closer towards the television screen. Ryuji/Noah, paralyzed with fear, repeatedly and futilely attempts to turn off the television, leading to what Chimene Mata describes

as "one of the most frightening scenes ever captured on film." As Sadako/Samara reaches the limit of the television screen's dimensions, one arm reaches through, transcending all barriers. (See Figure 2.1.1-2). The soggy body creepily moves toward him, with angst-ridden intensity, as you see his face shudder in fear one last time when she finally reaches him.

Figure 2.2 Sadako/Samara crawls out of the television.

With this urgent regression, Reiko/Rachel grieves Ryuji/Noah's loss and tries desperately to understand her own exclusion from this fate, and how she can save Yoichi/Aidan. She then realizes that her saving grace was no extension of mercy, but rather, due to the replication of the videotape. The film ends with Yoichi/Aidan copying the videotape, with the intent of voyeuristically condemning another's life, so the cycle of the curse can continue.

2.1.2 Ringu: The Novel

While the cinematic renditions trace their inception to Koji Suzuki's novel, *Ringu.* Both films vary radically from the original premise of the *Ringu* novel, so much so that critics suggest the film(s) are "more accurately called a re-interpretation, rather than an adaptation" (Lopez).

To begin, the protagonist in the book is a male journalist, Asakawa Kazuyuki, investigating several puzzling deaths, though none of the victims were related to him. Rather than turn to an ex-lover, he resorts to an old friend and colleague named Takayama Ryuji to help him solve the mystery.

While Sadako's victims still die on the seventh day after watching the videotape, their deaths are due to an obscure virus, similar to smallpox, that she inflicts upon them, and the antidote remains the same. "The purpose of a virus is to spread, and the videotape is a form of the virus. Thus, to break Sadako's curse, one must contribute to the virus" (Lopez).

Perhaps the extreme difference lays in the character of Shizuko Yamamura, Sadako's mother. Her character has a much more substantial role in the book, which helps to explain the origin of Sadako's powers. She begins exhibiting psychic powers after coming into contact with a statue of *En no Ozunu.* Due to the burgeoning of Shizuko's abilities, she experiences severe migraines, which bring her into contact with a psychiatric professor who is impressed by her talents. This fascination leads to the affair in which Sadako is conceived. While Shizuko's character still does commit suicide when Sadako was just a child, her daughter was not the cause, but rather, a deep depression brought on by a public humiliation, which Nakata included in his film version of the

story. Following the symmetry of the ring, she fittingly throws herself into an active volcano.

Sadako's background was changed quite a bit as well. She resided with a cousin after her mother's death, living to the age of nineteen, graduating high school, acting professionally and falling in love. Although she possessed psychic powers as well, she publicly used them only once when she was nine, accurately predicting a volcanic eruption. However, she was caught performing *nensha*, the projection of mental images, using a television screen; and inexplicably, several fellow actors turned up dead after listening to a slanderous tape of private moments with her and her lover, which were recorded out of jealousy.

The key factors leading up to Sadako's death are quite different as well. Her murderer was a male doctor, who discovered that she was biologically irregular, having two testaces, when he attempted to rape her. Though she tried to defend herself with her psychic powers, the doctor strangled her, and threw her body into a well, providing the shocking imagery we see in the film. Her last prediction was that she would be reborn, in the literal sense, which did come to pass.

While the novel never received much attention until Hideo Nakata's film, it laid the groundwork for a new monstrous heroine and highlighted legitimate concerns about the destructive powers that are related to the progress of technology. Nakata reinvented Suzuki's original work, "producing a story that is more human and character-driven" (Lopez).

2.1.3 *Ringu/The Ring:* Cinematic Interpretation and Symbolism

While J-Horror has roots in ancient Japanese superstition, *Ringu* and *The Ring* could also be seen as a "contemporary smorgasbord of paranoia" (Stone). Sadako/Samara personifies the "ubiquitous technological mediation – that is, the cameras, television sets, videocassette recorders, telephones and other such hardware foregrounded throughout the film – with the intrusion of 'posthuman' otherness into contemporary cultural life" (White 41). Both films suggest a subtext of mass media as the hidden monster. The stimulant of technology has produced a postmodern quagmire that questions traditional values, family relations and even the idea of self. The philosophy behind the Ring media aptly encapsulates the human plight of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Poignantly captured in the cursed video, Shizuko/Anna is combing her hair in the mirror, turns around, and looks directly at the viewer, almost through the barrier of the lens. (See Figure 2.1.3). Her incriminating gaze implies a warning. "One can see there not only the denunciation of the unhealthy voyeurism of a society subjugated to the misfortune of others but also the condemnation of the medium used: television and rating-crazy media involved in image manipulation" (Thom).

Figure 2. 3 Shizuko/Anna stare at the audience through a voyeuristic lens.

Verbinski, again, takes this concept a step further in *The Ring*. When Rachel goes investigates Samara's past at the Morgan Ranch, she finds Richard Morgan, Samara's adopted father. After a brief yet disturbing exchange, he electrocutes himself by stepping in a tub of water while holding a television in his arms. This scene makes two points – The first is that he knows what Samara is capable of and would rather experience electrocution than experience her vengeance; the second is to emphasize the aforementioned overexposure to multimedia.

Journalist Bruce Stone draws attention to the scene in which Rachel stands on the balcony of Noah's Seattle apartment while he watches the cursed video inside. The view shows a television on in every apartment window with people revolving their activities around it. "Here in microcosm is the film's broader agenda: The open windows are themselves transparent and eerily traversable screens, providing a foretaste of Samara's climactic entry" (Stone).

Sadako/ Samara's virus is, in essence, a loss of life through media-saturation. It is a lethargic existence of channel surfing and mouse-clicking, searching for the glamour of an artificial reality that exists only in pixels. The idea of making a copy is significant as a "motif of the simulacrum," expressing the loss of authenticity of the human experience. Her victims were never truly themselves again, only a carbon copy of a living soul. She is a pandemic, and will continue to spread due to what Verbinski calls "a transferable nature of hatred. That you can hurt me and then I can find it justifiable to hurt somebody else" [SIC] (White).

Also, in both films, Sadako/Samara is forced to live in isolation, with only a television set for companionship. This is a strong statement about contemporary society

changing structure of the family. The television set has replaced the parental units as guide and guardian, as the majority of mothers are in the workforce, and the parent(s) are too tired to invest their time instilling the needed values. In a study done in 1998 by A.C. Nielson Co., Americans were estimated as watching an average four hours of television a day ("Ubiquity"). As of April 2006, American Demographics and Veronis Suhler Stevenson estimated that the average American spends nine hours and thirty-five minutes a day using various media, including televisions, radio, books, video games and film (Stevenson).

Reiko/Rachel is a career-driven single mother. She loves her son Yoichi/Aidan, but feels guilty over the lack of quality time she spends with him. Her own lack of romance is sensed through the tension between her and Ryuji/Noah, who is dating his younger assistant. Verbinski drives the familial transition aspect even further in *The Ring.* Aidan calls Rachel by her first name, as opposed to the traditional "Mom." The two of them self-consciously dissect the situation through discussion, eroding the idea of generational norms. Also symbolic of family roots, there is the image of a Japanese maple tree, which is pictured burning in the cursed video; it appears to be singed onto the wall of the attic where Samara was forced to live. It serves as a clue, leading to Shelter Mountain, as well as a metaphor for the decay of the family unit (Thom). There's also the figure of the towel-headed man who is in the video pointing to the ocean, who makes an appearance in both videos. He is the one who wakes Reiko when Yoichi is watching the cursed video, and also points out the copy she made, helping her realize how to save her son's life. This figure could represent the loss of a strong male role model, or perhaps the emasculation of men in the equal-opportunity capitalist world.

2.1.4 *Ringu/The Ring:* Cultural Differentiation

While the overall differences in the films are inconsequential as far as the premise goes, they vary in subtleties of character, as well as in symbolism. This aspect, however, constitutes the most fundamental differences in basic cultural perceptions. The contrast in worldview offers a more substantial interpretation.

A comparison of the Japanese and American versions of the film reveals a difference of subtlety, or rather the lack thereof. The Japanese film conveys a story, using anxiety in a minimalist sense visually, allowing the metaphysical aspects of the characters to morph the plausibility of the story's reality through the use of the ubiquitous. With an ancient past linking supernatural interaction to everyday life, the entertaining factor lies more in the "how" of the story, than the logical "why. "

The story is strong enough to stand on its own merit, without the gluttonous additives of computer graphics and special effects, which are much more abundant in the American film. It should be noted that the Japanese are as capable, perhaps even more than Hollywood, of creating high quality visual graphics; therefore, it is a matter of discretion. This could also be related to the way Asians and North Americans actually experience the images visually. North Americans concentrate on what happens in the foreground, while Asians tend to observe the background in greater detail. Richard Nisbett, writing in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, believes the difference in focal points is culturally related: "Asians live in a more socially complex world than we do.... They have to pay more attention to others than we do. We are individualists" ("Asians"). Perhaps this is something that Nakata Hideo considered when making his film, because as one reviewer points out: "Both pictures are scary in different

ways – the Ring through atmospherics, Ringu through framing that favors negative space, leaving the viewer in constant fear that something will suddenly fill it" (Chaw).

However, the American adaptation has a wider gap of credibility to cover with its audience. Curses and superstitions have their place in the fantastic; thus, connecting the otherworldly powers of Samara to the commonality of a VHS tape requires an explanation more rooted in logic. At this juncture the American version differs, and the "how" is usurped as the "why" comes into play. Inference and interpretation are marginalized by the intensity of implication. Samara is undoubtedly the Other, as the audience watches the footage of her pacing in the psychiatric ward, a creature pre-determined monstrous, as she defies clinical explanation. She is a biological oddity that never sleeps, permeating the atmosphere with unease, since her presence is so saturated with evil, even animals sense and respond to her malevolence.

Rather than evoking empathy from the audience, Samara's ethereal existence is solidified in single dimensionality as she appears only as a nine year-old child. In the Japanese version, Sadako's humanity is given potential credence because she is depicted at various ages, and is therefore capable of aging. As the heroine, Rachel seeks redemption in human justice restored; there is a moment of Frankensteinian pity for Samara, allowing her the brief status of victim. However, with the climax looming, the human quest for understanding is lost for good, as the audience watches Samara climb out of the television and assume her predatory stance, since Noah never contributed to the cycle by making a copy.

While Samara's fate during life was tragic, though one could argue whether her villainy was passive or aggressive, her forced isolation seems a cruel fate for any child.

Yet, in a Western context, the idea of being alone does not necessarily hold as much of a negative connotation as it does in an Eastern Asian culture. There is a more intense fear of isolation in Asian culture, due to their collectivism, which is absent in Western culture, with its individualistic orientation (Kyungil and Markman 671).

Another interesting difference in adaptation was Verbinski's clever alteration of setting to a horse ranch, retaining the remoteness of an island, yet adding the otherness of an animal that would be able to sense Samara's evil. The horse's reaction to Rachel on the ferry, where it kicked down the stall and ran furiously to the edge, leaping to its death, let the viewer know that evil was present, the kind of evil that was an abomination to nature. The horse could sense the mutation of the virus upon the soul.

Also, in the American version, the ring is assumed to mean the circle of light Samara sees as the well is closing. However, the true context is meant to be the cyclical virus she has created and is forcing to spread. It is an "inauguration of a new cultural logic, a logic of simulacrum according to which copies of copies vary continually from an always already lost original" (White "Case Study" 41).

The remake of *The Ring* enjoyed popular success and was able to instill fear in American audiences; however, the very essence of perceived fear may stem from entirely different perspectives. While the film toys with psychological unease, flaunting obscure imagery that only enhances the tension, the root of the fear may be culturally different.

2.2 Aspects of J-Horror

Recognizing the potential, Hollywood has remade several of the more popular Japanese horror films, in addition to *The Ring* (2002), the American film industry has created *The Grudge* (2004), based on *Ju-On* (2003), and *Dark Water* (2005) based on *Dark Water* (2002). This kind of Western exposure has heightened curiosity for a broader audience, as well as raising several questions about the universal emotion of fear.

"J-Horror," a common term for the genre, is known for its "subtlety and restraint" (Lovgren). This differs drastically from what American horror fans have grown accustomed to, with American horror films fusing a hybridity of genres, specifically action, mystery, thriller and comedy, and the expectation of cheap scares and a shocking conclusion. Hollywood horror moguls have concocted an attention-grabbing mix of fast-paced entertainment with a protagonist whose normalcy is temporarily disrupted by the presence of immanent danger, typically depicted though the monster or antagonist (Carroll "Why" 34). The plot delivers you drama with a neatly wrapped conclusion, which frequently leaves room for a sequel.

Without understanding the genre of J-Horror, or even knowing that it exists, a film like *Ringu*, or even the American adaptation, might be difficult for a Western viewer to understand. For instance, James Berardinelli, an American reviewer for www.reelviews.net, acknowledges that Gore Verbinski is well informed when it comes to directing films, and knows how to maneuver the audience. He describes *The Ring* as "a sad amalgamation of irritating contrivances and gaping plot holes that defy even a generous attempt to suspend disbelief," declaring it an "incoherent mess" with "quick cheap thrills." Andrew O'Hehir, reviewer for www.salon.com, says, "What begins as a

routine teen-horror flick – an urban legend inflated to mythic status – eventually becomes a clammy, claustrophobic bad dream in which the power of evil cannot be contained by love or death or technology or any other force." While this could simply be a matter of taste, it seems that the aforementioned reviewers are viewing the film from an American perspective and are seemingly unaware of intricacies of J-Horror, as well as the complex history behind it.

"Japanese directors are considered masters at using silence and empty spaces to create an impending sense of doom and dread" (Lovgren). The plot lines tend to be more asymmetrical than linear and unafraid of an open-ended conclusion. The ending of the film does not need to be definitive. The uncertainty becomes all the more fearful.

2.2.1 *Kaidan*

Japanese culture interprets the idea of horror, or even what it is that horrifies, in a very different way than Western culture, particularly in film. While Westerners are still very much afraid of the supernatural, their idea of horror tends to manifest itself in a very Christian way, in the form of demons and possession, as seen in *The Exorcist* (1978). This struggle between good and evil typically results in victory for those who resist the wicked temptations, offering a return to normalcy in the conclusion.

Kaidan, or *kwaidan,* is Japanese, literally meaning "ghost stories," though it also encompasses a broader meaning of the paranormal (Screech). Nineteenth century journalist and ethnographer, Lafcadio Hearn, who specialized in Japanese folklore, made the term *kwaidan* popular. Of Irish and Greek origin, Hearn later changed his name to Yakumo Koizumi, after marrying Koizumi Setsu (Swainson). Shortly before his death in

1904, he published *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, a collection of seventeen tales of ancient folklore and colloquial legend pertaining to the spirit world. Four of Hearn's titles were adapted into a film, *Kwaidan,* in 1964 by Masaki Kobayashi ("Japanese Film Masters").

The word *ghost* translates as *obake* and means "transforming thing." "Japanese ghosts, then, are essentially transformations. They are one sort of thing that mutates into another, one phenomenon that experiences shift and alteration, one meaning that becomes unstuck and twisted into something else. Obake undermine the certainties of life as we usually understand it" (Screech). In essence, *obake* is any *yokai* or yurei that transforms itself into an object in the physical world, from an umbrella handle to the element of fire. This idea of transformation is taken from the Buddhist idea of constant change, deeming the human notion of self as an illusory concept. The *obake* reminds humanity of the fallibility of certainty and substance. In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, Sadako/Samara is able to manipulate the physical world of those who have seen the cursed video, and as a true *obake*, is able to undermine the certainty of reality.

It is the phantasmal belief in the spiritual that creates the haunting esoteric outcome of Japanese horror and that differentiates it from Western interpretations. In an interview with Naito Tadayuki, *Ringu* director Nakata Hideo acknowledges, "When making horror films, the methods of describing the spiritual world and the expression of horror are totally different between Japan and the West" (Tadayuki).

The Japanese view of the spirit world is also deeply rooted in religious principle, specifically in the form of Shinto, Buddhism and Taoism beliefs mixed with superstition,

mythology and folklore. Many of these ideas have evolved in order to help explain occurrences such as death and seemingly mysterious phenomena (Rubin).

Traditional Shinto belief holds that human beings coexist with a concealed spirit world composed of deities, demons, spirits and ghosts. Deities are believed to exist in the millions and are able to inhabit natural elements, such as trees, mountains, air and water. (Water has become a particularly important theme used by many Japanese directors in contemporary horror films.) The deities have two facets: one side is benevolent and docile, *nigi-mi-tama*, while the other, *ara-mi-tama*, is sadistic and cruel.

This duality is also true of demonic forces, which are not always necessarily evil, since they occasionally do good deeds, and are known to have a sense of humor. With supernatural powers, they can manipulate earthly forms and are thought to be the cause of most disasters. There are several types of demons including the *Oni* and *Tengu*. The *Oni* can represent anything from a wicked human disposition to sickness to a figure similar to the Grim Reaper. Their physical appearance is primitive and monstrous, characterized by their green and red garments according to their particular talents. Some are invisible and can be traced only by a faint whistling sound. The *Tengu* (Mountain Demon) is said to inhabit mountain forests, where danger befalls anyone who comes in contact with their presence. They can appear and disappear at will, and are depicted as bearded beings or hideous miniature men, women and children. Legend has it that routine sacrifices are made to them as a plea for protection (Rubin).

The human soul is thought to enter the spirit realm after death to become some form of spirit or deity. The idea of karma comes into play, with the incorporation of Buddhism, in the sense that an individual's life choices would determine his or her type

of existence in the afterlife. The emerging soul is thought to be contaminated by negative emotions and is trapped between the living and the dead as a ghost, until it is cleansed by rituals and prayers performed by the living to help with the soul's passage into the spirit world (Rubin). It is also believed that spiritual ancestors watch over their progeny and reside within close propinquity of their former inhabitance (Tadayuki).

However, if a life is ended in a violent manner, the soul is unable to pass into the finality of the dead, and remains in what Western religions would refer to as limbo. In this confinement of oblivion, the weathered souls seek revenge among the living for the cruelty of their fate. Many such ghost stories were dramatized in Kabuki plays, focusing on violence and female revenge. "Most creatures in stories of unfortunate spirits were women. They were vengeful ghosts, and the greater the misery endured by the woman during her lifetime, the more threatening her ghostly spirits would be after her death. Cruelty to women is a recurring theme in Japanese lore and legend" (Rubin). This recurring theme translates into the Japanese horror film as well, establishing the basic structure for the majority of genre films. With such a rich mythology, it is no wonder Sadako, a young woman strangled and thrown down a well, is so terrifying in her afterlife.

2.2.2 *Kabuki* and *Noh*

Scholar Jay McRoy emphasizes the need to take into account cultural differences when examining Japanese horror film. "Certain themes and images that emerge and re-emerge throughout Japanese horror cinema, for instance, can be traced back to Japanese folklore, as well as the performative traditions of Noh and Kabuki theatre" (15).

Known for its dramatic use of gore, Noh began in the 1300s as a dramatization involving traditional music and dance, with themes such as love, envy, vengeance and the supernatural. The plot revolves around two main actors: the *shite* and the *waki.* The former is the lead, who remains masked at all times, and whose character ranges from human to supernatural to animal; the latter's character is restricted to religious leaders, bureaucrats, ordinary soldiers and village dwellers, and remains unmasked. Their interaction is based on the *waki's* ability to coerce the *shite* to dance, shifting the sole focus of the play (Hand 19-20).

It is important to understand that Kabuki and Noh, while similar in some aspects, are still two different types of theater (Hand 19). Noh theater was considered an artistic performance by the affluent, whereas Kabuki was the popular culture of the common people ("Kabuki" Japan Guide).

While drawing on Noh traditions, Kabuki originated in the Edo period during the early seventeenth century ("Kabuki" Japan Guide). Its inception is attributed to Okuni, a spirited woman and a vivacious performer, who cultivated artistic dramas for the common people, depicting an array of genres according to the time of year ("Kabuki" Fix). Warmer weather brought more festive and jubilant productions, while ghost stories and graphic brutality occupied the cooler months (Hand 21). In spite of its female roots of origin, an all male cast has performed Kabuki since 1629. "*Kabuki* is renowned for its theatricality: elaborate costumes, remarkable stage effects, virtuoso performers" (20-21). Accompanied by a time-honored *shamisen,* a guitar with three strings, the actors intentionally maximize the theatrical tension with their monotonous delivery ("Kabuki" Japan Guide). This concept has translates well into the contemporary horror genre,

heightening and expanding the ordinary's potential for trepidation. "*Kabuki* remained essentially an entertainment of the common people – in reality a protest against social as well as dramatic conventions" (Lombard).

Evolving over 300 years, Kabuki is sophisticated yet elegant in its dramatic depiction of historical events and human conflict, thus offering an element to Japanese horror that Western audiences could easily miss. Impressionistic, uncanny, and sadistic, Kabuki incorporates a concept called "*zankoku no bi*" which means "aesthetic of cruelty" (Hand 21). It is little wonder that Japanese horror directors have incorporated this aesthetic into a genre that embodies that very value. Perhaps the most adapted kabuki play is *Yotsuya Kaidan*, which contains imagery such as long black hair and the upward gazing eye, two things Sadako is now infamous for today.

CHAPTER 3

UNDERSTANDING JAPANESE CULTURE

"We see the world through a constructed prism of our own making, built from our experiences and from our knowledge acquired through education and culture" (Prasso xi). We all have a worldview, which in essence, describes how everything is affected by the geographical location and cultural perspective we are looking from. While a myriad of extenuating factors go into our own individual point of view, there are also the mores of daily life built from a common history and shared by a particular group of people, based on region, resulting in a functional community. From this perspective I will explore the differences between Western and Japanese culture as they bear on the topic of this study.

3.1 Differences in Japanese Culture

"In a world increasingly aware of shared technologies and in which images, music and products are also shared, this leaves the anthropologist working in the domain not only of similarities, but of continued differences" (Martinez 3). This brings to mind the old French adage, *plus ca change, plus le meme chose.* A more plausible statement might be: The more surface things change and the more they seem to stay the same, the more significant the deeper differences become.

The current process of globalization and the awareness of international accessibility, as well as the lack of virtual boundaries, complicate the very notion of category (Martinez 3). According to D.P. Martinez, popular culture explores the

mutable coalescence between the material and the symbolic, making it "the best possible means through which to examine the process that is often called 'national' culture" (14).

While Japan has exported much of its popular culture to the world, whether in film, *manga* comics or karaoke, it retains an intangible sense of identity that can be understood only in a Japanese context. In Japan, it has been argued, "identity no longer depends on religious models or on loyalty to one particular ruler/leader, but on the wider construct of the imagined citizenship of the imagined national community. This nationalism depends on the mass production of mass culture and, while the logic of capitalism demands diversification, the underlying logic of one identity as different from that of their neighbors remains crucial to the construction of the nation-state" (Martinez 10).

Culture is a word with multifaceted implications and inferences that can mean anything from ethnic traditions, values and beliefs to high art, literature, and theater, or common practices and daily behavior. It is a categorical tool used to understand the differences of humankind's habits and perspectives, influencing everything from the type of political system to something as simple as the etiquette of a greeting, such as a handshake or a bow. It is a culmination of observed communication for a particular sect of people, uniting them by worldview. "As the global village continues to shrink and cultures collide, it is essential for all of us to become more sensitive, more aware, and more observant to the myriad motions, gestures, and body language that surround us each day" (Imai).

While there are several multicultural theories that suggest how to deal better with cross-cultural communication, there is no concrete rule to go by. *The Anxiety*

Uncertainty Management Theory, developed by William B. Gudykunst in 1988, uses thirty-seven axioms stating the uncertainty and anxiety of social encounters, due to unknown expectations. This sense of anxiety is increased when dealing with strangers or an individual from an inherently different culture. "Intercultural encounters are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, especially when cultural variability is high" (Griffin 496). Charles Berger elaborated on this theory, listing three combatant strategies that people tend to use to reduce uncertainty, including Passive, Active and Interactive behavior. A passive strategy would involve unobtrusive observation; an active strategy involves research and gathering information about the other in question; and interactive involves actual exposure and conversation ("Communication Theory").

Gerry Philipsen developed *The Speech Code Theory*, which is an ethnographic study of verbal communication among people based on region. Philipsen lists five propositions that summarize the cognitive and behavioral processes of said interactions. "The significance of speaking depends on the speech codes used by speakers and listeners to create and interpret their communication.... The people who live in the region will determine the meaning of certain words and phrases" (as summarized in Valentine). While Philipsen's research primarily deals with various cities inside the United States, its premise is applicable on a global scale, particularly due to the complex structure of the Japanese language. Since language can never completely convey the exact meaning, shared common knowledge helps to streamline the intended message.

Stella Ting-Toomey developed the *Face Negotiation Theory*, which specifically explores the differences between high-context cultures, like Japan, and low-context

cultures, like the United States (as paraphrased by Darrah). Differences begin with the construction of identity, positing a collective mentality in Eastern cultures, focusing on the group as a whole, and an individualistic mentality in Western cultures, where the focus is on the separateness and individuality of each person. Collectivistic cultures view individualistic cultures as arrogant, whereas individualistic cultures tend to see collective cultures as unclear and ineffective. Ting-Toomey suggests the negotiation of public perception of self through four different scenarios. First, is "face-restoration," regarding the amount of personal space oneself uses in public. Second, is "face-saving," which implies aversion out of respect for the other individual's desire for breathing space. "Asians have a smaller sphere of personal space than westerners" (Scollon and Scollon 159). It is important to note that Southeast Asia is one of the most densely populated places on earth, and the idea of personal space may be related to the luxury of actually having it. "Face-assertion" is the third scenario, which deals with each person's need for acceptance in a group setting. Fourth, is "face-giving," which is supporting another's longing to feel included in a group (as summarized by Darrah).

In order to place the situational plot in the right context, Ting-Toomey's theory is particularly relevant when studying Japanese film. For instance, in *Ringu*, the gravity of Sadoko's isolation would be much more intense, due to the collectivist structure she was used to, and the importance of group inclusion. In order to convey appropriately the severity of this emotional experience, the American version, *The Ring*, depicted Samara alone in the loft of a horse barn, cut off from communication with the outside world. Had the American version kept the Japanese scenario, American audiences would have missed the complexity of the situation, due to a cultural misunderstanding.

Ron and Suzanne Wong Scollon have spent over twenty years researching the differences in communication styles between the East and West. Frequently, they noticed, people make errors based not simply on the barrier of language, but also in the hierarchy of information presented. "The difference in discourse pattern leads the Westerner to focus on the opening stages of the discourse as the most crucial while the Asian speaker will tend to look for the crucial points to occur somewhat later" (2). This type of communication difference can be misconstrued in subtitled films, leading to a misinterpretation of the original meaning.

The East and West have different perspectives relating to style of communication. Westerners focus on the individualistic aspect, while Easterners tend to consider the group dynamic and the overall harmony of the situation. They are more aware of how their personal actions affect the whole, which is directly related to the permanence of the groups with which they are associated. This is a stark contrast to the Western egalitarian idea of self-sufficiency. Even considering personality, one must take an individualist approach for it to be of any consequence. Subtlety and restraint are much more important in Asian cultures, as minimal value is placed on the emotive aspect of language (Scollon and Scollon 144-51). "Unlike the United States, where openness is a prized societal value, Japan is a society where true feelings are hidden" (Prasso 174).

Shokichi Oda explores the meaning of an ancient saying about the "Japanese smile," a term that Lafcadio Hearn coined in the early twentieth century: "smiling on the face, crying on the heart." An emotionless calm is always expected in civic settings, rooted in a fear of being laughed at (15). According to Jessica Milner Davis, the necessity for façade pertains to the "shame culture" of Japan (3). In relation to *Ringu*,

this is the reason why Yamamura Shizuko had to kill herself after running out of the press conference. She appeared to be a fraud to the world and was no longer respectable. With such importance placed on saving face, it is understandable that a scale of propriety regarding laughter exists.

There is also a term, *giri*, which has no English counterpart. Its meaning can be roughly defined as "an innate sense of duty, obligation, morality and the absolute need to return a favor" ("Etiquette"). This sense of obligation is bound not only to family, but any type of benefactor. It is closely related to the idea of personal honor, which is taken especially seriously in a shame-oriented culture.

3.2 Japanese Humor

> One aspect of cultural communication which is often open to misinterpretation is this one of smiling or laughing. Many researchers have argued that smiles or laughing are universal human characteristics which we all immediately understand... Unfortunately, from one cultural group to another there is a great deal of variability about when one smiles or laughs and what it should be taken to mean. (Scollon and Scollon 156)

Western media are saturated with various versions of comedy, ranging from slapstick to satire. This type of intense exposure creates an air of familiarity with humor and its application in a variety of situations. In Western culture, humor is frequently used as an icebreaker, initiating play cues to minimize the uncertainty factor. However, this is not the norm in every culture. In Japan, "humor is not always permitted to appear in the same places and under the same conditions as in European cultures" (Davis 1). Their

apprehension toward interpersonal public laughter is connected to a fear of being laughed at. While this particular fear is something many cultures experience, it operates on a much more concentrated level in Japan, due to the culture of shame, and it is thought that laughter should be controlled. Laughter is also considered a lower caste on the scale of emotions (Oda 16-17).

However, given the right circumstances, Japanese humor can be very lively. A common form of humor is "sha-re," which is equivalent to an English pun (Nagashima 75). This type of wordplay requires some cunning, due to the overall complexity of the Japanese language, which derived from Chinese characters, and a pair of forty-six letter alphabets (Japan Corner). Makiko Takekuro deduces that the difference between Japanese and English humor is directly related to "rhetorical differences in the two languages" (94). English uses "far-fetched rhetoric" whereas Japanese uses "word-bounded rhetoric," meaning English humor is based on the wit of new exchanges, while "Japanese jokes keep the point of view inside the discourse-context and relate the point of view to the other speakers' utterances but altering or adding other meanings to those already in play on the utterance level" (94).

Typically, though, jokes are reserved for intimate setting with close friends and family (Takekuro 89). While many of the aforementioned stipulations are disappearing in today's generation, there is still an underlying knowledge threaded throughout Japan's culture (Oda 24).

3.3 Stereotypes of Asian Women

An exotic mystery from a Western perspective, stereotypes of Asian women have teetered between various concepts of fantasy: demure sensuality and silk kimonos or the calculating sadism of a leather whip. "There are few greater dichotomies than these — the submissive, servile Oriental and the Dragon Lady dominatrix" (Prasso 8). It is comparable, I think, to the dichotomous the "Whore/Madonna" dilemma in Western culture, particularly during the Middle Ages – women as Daughters of Eve, bringing evil into the world, or women as daughters of Mary, bringing redemption. The objectification of such mental images still persists today with the "double-standard" that exists between the sexes due to the inequality of behavioral expectations. It is an attempt to control female actions, and the price for disobedience is societal condemnation. Author Sheridan Prasso, brings into focus the "Orientalized filter" of the *Asian Mystique*: "Our perspectives are misshaped – contorted – by centuries of misunderstandings built on mythologies, fantasies, fairy tales and fears" (xi).

As Western cultures have been renegotiating the traditional ideas of gender, many men feel betrayed by this drastic shift in ideology. "For Western men, this desirability among Asian women and the 'remasculating' that accompanies it is potent therapy" (Prasso 6). The most common interracial coupling in the United States is Caucasian men and Asian women (7). The allure of the Orient is the white man's vindication of masculinity and dominance.

"Casting Asia as sexual and dangerous is what has drawn the eyes of the West to the East for centuries" (Prasso 393). Imagination lends to the eroticism of difference, projecting ideas onto the unknown, predicated by alluring misconceptions of the past.

While there are many types of ethnicities producing many attractive women, Asian women seem to be regarded as the most sensual on earth. Such notions stem as far back as Greek mythology. The goddess Aphrodite, "the goddess of love, beauty and sexual rapture," was based on the Sumero-Babylonian goddess Ishtar, the Asian goddess of fertility, also known as the Whore of Babylon (Lindemans). Rich in erotic suggestion, this mythology stimulated Western curiosity. The foreign spices, intoxicating scents and plush fabrics, imported by Roman traders and merchants only enhanced the ambient tales (Prasso 9-10).

According to Prasso, the personification of the "Dragon Lady" was created through the vilification of the Last Empress of China. In the late nineteenth century, a Chinese exile named Kang Yu-wei counterfeited information about Empress Dowager to British journalists at the *TIMES* in London. These misleading stories were printed and taken as truth by an ignorant yet eager public. Adding to the fictitious lore was Edmund Blackhouse, who wrote two fraudulent books claiming to have had unscrupulous sexual rendezvous with the Empress and said he found documentation of her degenerate behavior hidden in the Forbidden City. Prasso credits Sterling Seagrave for vindicating the Empress Dowager's reputation in his book, *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China*. Seagrave's biography reveals her to be very docile in nature, the very antithesis of the reptilian caricature for which she has become known. (30-33).

Prasso traces the metamorphosis of the multiple *Butterfly* adaptations, demonstrating "how a loose interpretation of historical fact, rewritten as fiction, and then transformed onto stage and screen, takes the image of Asian woman and distorts her to Western fantasies" (84). The original 1887 novel *Madame Chrysantheme* by Pierre Loti

tells the story of a Frenchman who visits Japan and takes a temporary wife, grows bored and leaves her, while Miss Chrysanthemum pleads hysterically for him to stay; he briefly returns to find her counting the money waiting for her next temporary wifely assignment. The fictional events are based on the alleged experiences of the author, whose real name was Julien Viaud. This story was then converted to an opera and ballet in 1893, and then appeared as a short story in *American Magazine* called "Madame Butterfly" by John Luther Long in 1898. It was here that the story took on another twist, making the male lead an American naval officer who unknowingly leaves a pregnant temporary wife behind, and returns to Japan several years later with an American wife, who claims the offspring as her own, concluding with the Japanese woman's attempted suicide. This story was then adapted into a play by David Belasco, which was performed in London around 1900, and seen by Giacomo Puccini, who adapted it into an opera yet again in 1904. Puccini refined the coarse characters and turned it into one of the most romantic love stories of the twentieth century. The Asian heroine is transformed from a greedy woman-for-hire to a wrongly scorned lover and a self-sacrificing mother. "And it is Puccini's final portrayal of Asian woman as a delicate, fluttery, bewitching butterfly that has endured, affecting so many of the images of Asian women since" (Prasso 86).

While researchers and historians, such as Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* in 1978, have since debunked many of the erotic depictions of Asian women, preconceived notions still exist in much of the twentieth century West, having already been tainted by the entertainment value of these stereotypes in Hollywood (as summarized by Prasso 30-33). The unfamiliar is sometimes easier to digest when typecast, particularly when

dealing with dissimilarity. Often perceived as the exotic Other in Hollywood films, certain fantasy-fueled Asian female stereotypes persist.

A young Hollywood re-worked the *Madame Butterfly* story several times in 1920s and 1930s, introducing the passive, obedient yet seductive Asian woman to a global audience. Around the same time, the concept of the "Dragon Lady" was incarnated through actress Anna May Wong. Her most noteworthy films are *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *Limehouse Blues* (1934), though she appeared in an estimated sixty films until the end of her career in 1960. The duplicity of the "Dragon Lady" was her legacy: a vilified, heartless and promiscuous woman who uses her beauty and wiles to manipulate others, especially Western males.

Prasso cites television as one of the main perpetuators of stereotypes, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s in shows like *M.A.S.H.*, *Happy Days*, and the miniseries, *Shogun* (63-70). These objectifications and stereotypes continue today and have even metamorphosed into aspects of fetishism, i.e. "Yellow Fever," a slang term for a non-Asian individual who displays a strong preference for someone of Asian descent, most commonly used in regards to white men and Asian women. Yet the appeal of these ideas may derive from a larger cultural phenomenon.

While feminism may largely be viewed as a Western export, women around the world are also redefining the boundaries between societal power, gender roles and sexuality. Feminism is a particularly interesting phenomenon in Asian women, who have been romanticized and demonized in Western thought for centuries. It was contact with Western culture that ignited concern about women's rights at the outset; however, in an attempt to defeat patriarchal oppression, Asian women have become victims of

imperialist propaganda through the perpetuation of stereotypes. Even within the Japanese culture, the media have dismissed feminism as "just another fashion from the West," though it is distinct possessing its own characteristics (Darling-Wolf 1).

According to Japanese sociologist Mariko Fujiwara, who Prasso interviewed, many of the stereotypes that still persist in Western culture are quite out of date. "It's very difficult to find a submissive woman in our society. If they are submissive, it's because they have a choice. Some people have a style of submissiveness, but that's the position they choose to be in rather than one they are put in" (Prasso 20-21). Prasso points out that there are submissive women in every culture, as well as more dominant ones, and this classification is not necessarily culturally related. As a matter of fact, the Japanese government is on par with the United States regarding the women-to-men ratio of elected officials.

Again, the meaning of sexism varies from culture to culture. For instance, when Japanese married couples socialize, men tend to go out with other men, and women prefer to mingle with other female friends. It is not a preset expectation to socialize together, especially if the partners have differing interests. Offense is neither intended, nor taken.

Prasso warns against misjudging the differences in culture, even if it is on a subconscious level. "The stereotypes and perceptions held in Western culture as a result of all this imagery, commerce, interaction and history make up the Asian Mystique," and it could be more costly than either culture realizes (395).

CHAPTER 4

THE HORROR GENRE

4.1 Genre

"Genre creates an enduring set of expectations that becomes a contract between creator and audience" (Gamarra 8). However, such expectations change with society and time and are susceptible to diverse interpretations, leaving audience expectations as an unreliable factor. This is not to say genre is merely superficial hype, notes Phillips, but to the contrary, it provides us with a parameter of possibilities, "offering a vocabulary and a set of rules which allow us to 'shape' reality, thus making it appear less random and disordered" (127).

Extracted from the French and Latin root *genus*, genre signifies a particular kind or class, providing categorical constructs (Harris 509). The notion of genre can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics*, where he analyzed the differences between tragedies, epics and so on, trying to distinguish each one's importance and establish guidelines for future reference (Buscombe 12). "Aristotle's original intention was descriptive, not prescriptive" (13). His speculations were codified into a strict set of rules during the Renaissance, which the seventeenth and eighteenth century academics divided further into categories they called *species*. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a backlash against systematic oppression, an artistic revolution parallel to the social and political revolutions of the time, sought to destroy boundaries that were thought to inhibit creativity. Hence, the idea of genre was largely abandoned until the 1930s and 1940s when the neo-Aristotelians began rebelling against the ideas of New Criticism and sought

to prevent various works of literature from being isolated, thus instituting the application of genre-related categorizations (12-13). Trends regarding genre in literary criticism spilled over into the visual arts.

Andrew Tudor explores the variations of genre usage and highlights the increasing role that genre plays in contemporary film. "Genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (7). He proposes that genre is not confined to a critic's definition, but rather to a set of cultural expectations that change over time. Tudor feels that genre is most useful when studied in specific cinematic groupings where cultural interpretation is taken into account in order to fully understand the sociological and psychological impact a film is capable of having on a particular audience (10).

Genre serves as a guideline in the construction of plot, and as a complicated system of negotiated meanings between the viewer and *auteur*, yet it is also broader. As film critic Steve Neale observes:

> Genre can be approached from the point of view of the industry and its infrastructure, from the point of view of their aesthetic traditions, from the point of view of the broader socio-cultural environment upon which they draw and into which they feed, and from the point of view of audience understanding and response. (2)

Hence, genre offers a creative pool from which to draw and is a "vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts" (Jancovich 12). Themes and concepts of genre bring certain expectations to the forefront without actually giving away the storyline. For instance, while watching a horror film, one may anticipate the feeling of fear without actually knowing which characters will die. The same can be said for a

musical or gangster film, both of which elicit a different set of presumptions without relaying the specific plight of the characters.

Yet this thematic variation complicates the very existence of genre, according to Trudier Harris: "Genre is thus an umbrella concept that allows for many disparate, and often related, concepts to be conveniently divided and subdivided. Genre can be as expansive or confined as disciplinary usages demand" (509). Hence, the boundaries of genre are not always concrete, but rather intangible, particularly when it comes to the fantastical. Sometimes the genres that intertwine are seemingly polar opposites, like horror and comedy, and other times they are similar in nature, creating a source for debate about the existence of genre itself.

Genre is a theoretical form that cannot be contained, just as ideas and plot cannot be limited to structure. Genre spans across a chasm of possibilities, held together by repetition and response, particularly in the case of horror. As Kinal comments, "Horror films challenge our notions of categorisation" (71). Perhaps this mutable aspect is more a positive quality than a problem of definition. After all, the horror film intentionally negates normalcy and defies traditional logic. Jancovich summarizes, "Rather than horror having a single meaning, different social groups construct it in different, competing ways as they seek to identify with or distance themselves from the term, and associate different texts with these different constructions of horror" (159). However, the common thread holding the genre together, Gamarra explains, is "how pleasure is attached to rigid and monotonous codes as well as novelty and variation over time" (8). The fulfillment of expectation, mixed with a deliberate paradox, provides a sense of

satisfaction for the viewer. Perhaps it is this satisfaction that creates the strongest motivation in defining process.

In his essay "The Genre Function," Anis Bawarshi discusses the expansion of genre studies from a strictly literary perspective to include communication, education, rhetoric and composition (335). This analysis helps to explain and accept the possibilities that genre has to offer. As Bawarshi argues, "Genres, ultimately, are the rhetorical environments within which we recognise, enact, and consequently reproduce various situations, practices, relations, and identities" (336). He subsumes Michel Foucault's idea of the "author-function," which briefly summarized, refers to the role of an author and the status that a text is given, with his concept of *genre function* (336-338). He believes that genre function offers a broader, more inclusive, concept that "can help us democratise some of the entrenched hierarchies... hierarchies perpetuated by the author-function that privilege literary texts and their 'authors' as somehow more significant than non-literary texts and their writers" (338). This concept is also applicable to film, replacing the author with the director, and the genre application remains the same, though it now functions with a broader definition. *The Ring* should first be viewed as a *Horror* film. Then, in a *Horror* context, the audience can experience the ideological and rhetorical levels, in comparison with our own realities (339).

Bawarshi also examines the "socio-rhetorical" aspect of genre, which was first explored by Carolyn Miller in 1984 in her article, "Genre as Social Action" (339). The basic premise extends the traditional meaning of genre from "arbitrary forms that contain ideas," which are "regulative," to a "constitutive" tool that can "recognise our communicative goals, including why these goals exist, what and whose purposes they

serve, and how best to achieve them," as paraphrased by Bawarshi (339-40). As individuals become familiar with particular social situations and their functioning purpose, these situations then begin to structure expectations of future encounters. This, then, is the most basic function of genre.

Simply put, genre is "a multi-faceted phenomenon" that helps the viewer to understand what he or she is watching, framing the art in a particular context, as well as emphasising crucial elements of the film (Neale 2). *Ringu* and *The Ring* can be viewed as part of the horror genre due to their ability to invoke fear in the audience, as well as specific identification with the horror genre motif. In order to establish genre's parameters of use and relevance, it is worthwhile to examine further the diameter of its function.

4.1.1 Horror Film Theory

McRoy points out that J-Horror includes not only ancient Japanese motifs of horror, but also "aesthetic trappings of western – particularly US– horror films." (176). This influence is most notable at the beginning of *Ringu* and *The Ring*, when Tomoko/Katie, and Masami/Becca introduce the audience to the idea of the cursed videotape and the horrific potential of the unknown. In order to understand the cultural differences, it is necessary to understand the genre that provides the commonality.

"The horror film is an invitation to indulge in deviant, anti-social behaviour by proxy – to commit gratuitous acts of violence, indulge our puerile dreams of power, to give in to our most craven fears," observes horror novelist Stephen King (31). This invitation, extended without consequence, arouses our primitive instincts, allowing our

unconscious desires vicarious reign. The horrific and perverse become exhilarating and laughable, manoeuvring in and out of the realm of normalcy and challenging our preconceived notions of the status quo. By allowing us to glimpse at death and the inevitable through a fantastical lens, we become more fully aware of life.

Experts such as Paul Wells, Noel Carroll, Robin Wood and Stephen King examine the boundaries and intentions of the horror film, and speculate as to the reasons behind its success. The presence of a monster is essential in a horror film, but it is necessary to decipher what the horror is. Using the concise definition for the horror film, Wood proposes this basic formula: "normality is threatened by the Monster" (31). The idea of the status quo provides the only consistency throughout the narratives of the genre, and essentially, is the grounding factor in human reality.

In order to place the term *horror* in the appropriate context, I shall refer to Noel Carroll's definition of *art-horror* in *Horror and Humour*, which is "the sort of art associated with one particular genre of mass art" (147). In essence, this term is used to describe the genre of horror through artistic means, as opposed to the horrific incidents that occur in reality. Then, another question arises. What is the difference between a 'snuff' film (a sadomasochist type of film that contains the perverse reality of death) and a horror film? The major distinction is that we perceive the horror film to be a fictional narrative, which is therefore acceptable to watch and enjoy. Unreality is a necessary component of fiction, particularly in the case of horror. When we watch a horror film, we do not react to it in the same way we would to a murder or rape that is reported in the news. Rather, when we see Tomoko/Katie dead in the closet, we view the event as fiction, allowing us to enjoy that which would otherwise cause guilt or pain in reality. It

draws from the creativity of aversion rather than the tragedy of real life. Fantastical horror relies on the absurd. The audience must understand the difference between the fictional Samara and the historical Boston Strangler for the horror film to be effective. Therefore, Carroll's definition of *art-horror* will be the basis of discussion, so as not to confuse creative license with criminal intent.

King uses this notion of horror and divides the genre into two sects: the first is a " 'gross-out' level," which aims at sheer revulsion (4). The gore of horror films belongs to this sect. This is what the horror film achieves on the most basic level: the shock-value of disgust. This basic level of repulsion typically relates to the abject features of the monster of the film. It is prevalent in both *Ringu* and *The Ring*, though the American version definitely plays up the grotesque angle. *Ringu* emphasizes Sadako's repulsion with subtlety: her upturned eye, the black hair covering her face (both of which are long-standing symbols of Japanese horror) and her otherworldly walk. *The Ring* relies more on dramatic makeup and computer graphics to horrify its audience. Samara resembles a waterlogged corpse with veins protruding from her skin and posthumously glazed eyes, leaving little to the audience's imagination. (See Figure 4.1). Verbinski intensifies Samara's lethal power through the hideous appearance of her victims' faces: horror-stricken and morphed into inverted photographic replicas of their original selves.

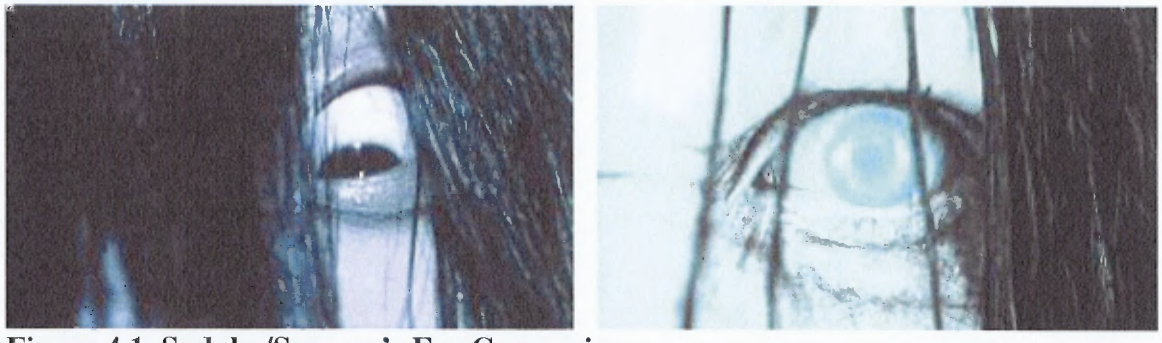

Figure 4.1 Sadako/Samara's Eye Comparison.

The other type of horror film King refers to is "a moving, rhythmic search," which "achieves the level of art simply because it is looking for something beyond art, something that predates art," something he labels "phobic pressure points" (4). This type of horror film pinpoints the shared fears of the collective consciousness, the anxieties that plague a particular culture or society, as well as the discomfort that surrounds the unfamiliar. This aspect of horror arouses our emotions to the point of catharsis. Whether our fear of nature, death or the ill of humanity, a phobic pressure point elicits that emotional response. Again, *Ringu* and *The Ring* directly hit this phobic pressure point by allowing Sadako/Samara to enter the audience's realm. As Sadako/Samara climbs out of the television set, the audience experiences a "literal instance of border dissolution" (Stone). The hypothetical ring moves beyond the two-dimensional screen we ourselves are viewing. Fear invades our conceptual boundaries, and temporarily shakes the very structure of perceived reality. As horror film producer Takashige Ichise notes, "When the audience goes home, in the elevator, in the bath, wherever they are, they will still feel afraid" (Reynolds).

The horror film covers a diverse range of issues in a conservative manner while, at the same time, exposing the repressed aspects of human nature. Yet, the definition of a horror film is called into question by the notion of genre. Genre, according to Gamarra, Jr., "raises a host of concerns ranging from the economic, the aesthetic, the temporal, the socio-cultural, and the psychological" (8). The philosophical subtext is weaved throughout a plot and iconography to enhance the ferocity of the monster. In *Ringu* and *The Ring*, the subtext warns against the potential dangers of mass media, technology, and the destruction of the family unit, while the more surface level offers a good scare from a

telekinetic and telepathic vengeful spirit. In order to elucidate the complexities of genre, the iconography must be explored.

4.1.2 Iconography

As we have become accustomed to what belongs in the realm of horror, certain criteria are embossed on our unconscious expectations. We have an idea of what is supposed to happen and this idea must unfold for viewer satisfaction to be attained thus establishing a paradigm for the genre. The term *mise-en-scene*, French for "having been put into the scene," was coined by theorists analyzing authorship and the role the director plays interpreting the script and demonstrating his creative control (Rowe 93-94). In order to elaborate on this paradigm, the iconography of the horror genre must be considered.

Named after the effect it intends to create, the horror genre thrives on what film critic Patrick Phillips describes as "visual signifiers," or symbolic elements such as screaming, blood and death, which underline the basic "identity" of a film (128). Without these necessary components, the word *horror* would hardly possess the potency of which its reputation boasts. According to Phillips, the iconography includes sets, props, and costumes, which help the viewer to place the characters in the appropriate environment (128).

4.1.3 Setting

In horror films, though settings vary, haunted houses, woods, graveyards and other isolated areas tend to be popular locations, but they are not altogether a necessary part of the formula. While *Ringu* and *The Ring* make use of familiar horror hauntings, the shocking climax of the film takes place in a living room.

One commonplace character of the genre is that horrors usually take place at night. As King notes, "what is laughable in the sunshine is often tougher to smile at by starlight." This is not to say that nighttime is the only setting in horror films, but rather the setting where the horrific is more likely to take place. The daylight serves as a sanctuary in which the protagonists can figure out how to outsmart the monster, or an environment where the monster, such as a vampire, werewolf, zombie or ghost, cannot sustain life. The full moon serves as the nocturnal sustenance to werewolves, unleashing the bestial animal within. Perhaps it is not the transformation of the monster at all, but rather the transformation back into the self, without the use of masks and facades, which daylight requires. The darkness is seductive yet dangerous, indicative of the unconscious. Our child-like fears are contained in a milieu through which we cannot see, exaggerating possibility. It may be the obscurity of light's absence that allows our imaginations to bypass reason and explore the fantastical without abandon. *Ringu* and *The Ring* use this preconception to trick the audience into believing the horror has ended. When Reiko/Rachel searches for Samara's remains in the well, it is nighttime. The next morning, it appears as though the danger has ended. Yet, in full daylight, Sadako/Samara emerges from the well into Ryuji/Noah's apartment, thus intensifying the unexpected climax.

Graveyards, mausoleums, and crypts are the material representation of our anxiety about death. As *memento mori*, they are the gateway to the realm of the unknown; and if it is indeed unknown, then anything is possible: zombies, ghosts, or unspeakable manifestations of evil, like Sadako and Samara. In the case of *Ringu* and *The Ring*, a well serves as the watery tomb. Wells also have a unique place in Japanese lore, as a well was thought to be "a symbolic link to the underworld" (Bush 198). There are two infamous tales of vengeful female spirits who were murdered by being thrown down a well. Oiwa's adulterous husband poisons her with a potion that disfigures before it kills. Her hair begins to fall out, and one eye is sealed shut while the other is repugnantly cast upward. In a climax of revenge, Oiwa haunts him with visions of corpses and coiling black hair until her death is avenged (Bush 138-39). Oiwa has been the subject of many kabuki plays and obscure artwork, as was Okiku. She was a servant girl who was tricked and murdered for refusing the wanton advances of a samurai, made to believe she lost the tenth piece in a valuable set of plates. Her spirit is thought to float above the well, counts to nine and then releasing a horrible shriek (140-41). Both of these spirits definitely influenced Nakata's interpretation of Sadako.

It is common, in the horror genre, for films to incorporate references to past iconoclasts of the genre. These references are typically very subtle and may serve as clues or identification with the genre. Just as Nakata included long black hair, mirrors and a well, which are all connected to Japanese folklore, Verbinski was careful to do the same with his adaptation. The cabin that Tomoko stayed in was B4, a verbal reference to the past in English. Verbinski used the number 12, which is a nod to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) (twelve rooms, twelve vacancies at the Bates Hotel), as well as the videotape clip

that shows Richard Morgan peaking through the second floor window. Thus, the minor details of the films link them to the horror genre.

4.1.4 Props

Varieties of conventions are familiar to the horror film. The type of monster determines the type of props that are used in a given scenario. For instance, while watching a vampire film, one might expect to see coffins, crosses, garlic, and wooden stakes. Previous genre exposure, originating in the first cycle of horror films, tells us that vampires sleep in coffins, cannot harm people with crosses or garlic, and can be killed only with a wooden stake through the heart.

In werewolf films, silver bullets are needed for a return to normalcy. A gunshot to the head is usually the most effective way to kill a zombie, as films like *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero 1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero 1978) prove; however, in *Stacy* (Naoyuki Tomomatsu 2001), the only way to kill the adolescent schoolgirl zombies is to chop them up into small pieces.

Slasher films usually contain sharp or phallic images like knives and chainsaws. Consider villains like Michael Meyers, Jason, and Freddie, who all used some sort of stabbing utensil to commit their murders. Perhaps this is because a stab wound is bloodier, increasing the gore content, provoking the audience's reaction more dramatically than a gunshot would. A knife also has a sexual connotation, since it penetrates its prey, piercing flesh with a lethal thrust, as in the notorious shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), where Norman Bates delivers the final blows in synchronization with the music. Yet Miike's *Audition* (1999) transforms the very idea of a slasher film with the

use of piano wire and needles to torture her victims before Asami mercifully decides to give them death.

Ringu and *The Ring* are both saturated with striking imagery, particularly on the cursed videotape, which serves as conduit and crux of the narrative. The montage appears obscure, artistic and somewhat abhorrent, though as the film unfolds, the images gain meaning in relation to the plot. In *The Ring,* Noah makes a comparison regarding the videotape, likening it to an arty student film.

The peculiar assortment of video clips seems foreboding yet curiously inviting. Thoughts immediately scatter over the perplexing tale that could possibly add a cohesive element. Moreover, while the images are indeed relevant to the plotline, they provide a rich subtext of possibility. This subtext stands out as culturally significant, as the images that entice the viewer's interest are quite different in each film.

Ringu's montage is a jumbled assortment of moonlight, shifting mirrors, kanji (newspaper articles of Shizuko's prediction), people primitively crawling forward and backward, a man with a white towel on his head, a peculiar eye with a reversed Japanese character representing chastity, and ends with a view of the well (The Ring Area). All the while, there is high-pitched screeching and a monotone chanting, which amplified says, "Frolic in brine, goblins be thine," or depending upon the translation, "play in the water and a monster will come for you" (White 40).

While Verbinski stays true to Nakata's string of images, he also adds a few elements of his own. In a scene of contrasted shadows of an empty chair and a glass of water, Verbinski includes a centipede, meant to be an allusion to Asian horror cinema (Thompson). Imagery relating to the grotesque such as maggots and flies are depicted to

objectify the prophetic vision of death. There is also the lighthouse, which serves as an illuminating clue and perhaps represents loneliness, or alternatively, a beacon of hope, suggesting that there is a way to survive the virus.

Mirrors are significant in Japanese mythology, since it was believed that a mirror can absorb the soul of an individual, if it is used too frequently; hence, the Japanese character meaning "soul" was commonly etched on the back of many old mirrors as a warning against vanity. "Even apart from its role in the Shinto religion, the mirror has a special place in Japanese tradition," as mirrors are frequently included in early Japanese myths and legends (Bush 124-25). One such myth, entitled "The Soul of a Mirror," is a story about a poisonous dragon that captures the female spirit of a mirror, forcing her to lure people to the bottom of a well, where they would drown. Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* contains a story about a woman, "Soul of a Woman," who drowns herself out of shame, since the mirror she reluctantly donated for the new temple bell refused to melt (124). *Ringu* and *The Ring* referenced this theme in the cursed video (See Figure 4.2).

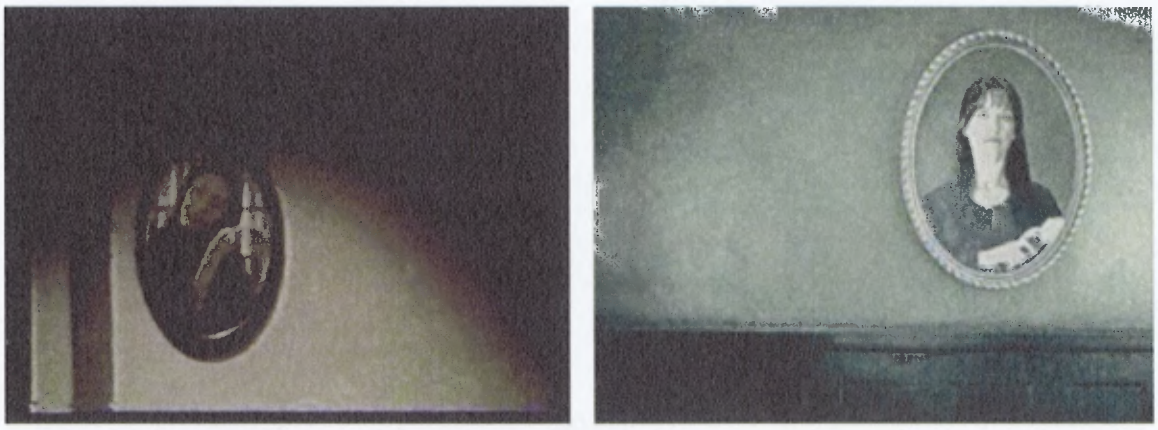

Figure 4.2 *Ringu/The Ring* Mirror Comparison.

4.1.5 Costumes

Costumes are seen as a "universal and visible cultural element consisting of sets of body symbols deliberately designed to convey messages at different social and psychological levels...part of the total structure of personal appearance which includes hairstyles, ornaments, masks, decorations and mutilations" (Kuper 348). Costumes allow the viewers to categorize aesthetically the context they are viewing, communicating nonverbal information and familiarizing them with the situation they are observing. The horror genre does not rely on any specific attire for identification due to the variety of locations and characters, and the span of time in which a horror can occur, particularly in the case of the protagonist. This aspect of horror differs from the gangster or ninja films, two genres that follow strict costume specifications. In the horror genre, the monster is the definitive spectacle.

Even so, an accumulation of characters associated with the genre, but not exclusive to it, is worth exploring. Certain characters have left an imprint on the mass unconsciousness of our culture. For instance, a mere mention of the word *monster* could bring images of Dracula and Frankenstein, perhaps the most famous monsters of all time, spinning into the imagination. Personifications of the un-dead, such as vampires, werewolves and zombies, are also repetitive creatures familiar to the audience. While certain details depend upon artistic interpretation, vampires consistently have fangs and werewolves' faces get hairy as the full moon appears. Zombies are portrayed by a discoloration of skin and tattered clothing, though the most obvious depiction is in the robotic movement of the creatures. A mummy is wrapped in cloth concealing the shape of a human-like figure. A witch's costume could be anything from a black pointed hat

and broom to a supernatural presence. And now, the horror genre has a new figure that makes the audience cringe, the figure of a stoic girl in a nightgown (see Figure 4.1.5), with sheet of long black hair hiding her face, save an eyelid turned upward. Whether we call her Sadoko or Samara, her image will be associated with fear for years to come.

Figure 4.3 Sadako/Samara Costume Comparison.

4.1.6 Sound

Movie music has the ability to seduce our emotions and possesses the "power to affect the visual field and the imagination" (Kelleghan). Certain sounds exist in the audience's unconscious that helps to set the appropriate mood. For instance, high-pitched music is used to create a frightening environment, pushing the suspense toward climax. "A heavy brass chord announces danger; a low, sustained tone creates mystery; sliding intervals of gliding strings imply seductiveness" (Kelleghan). Many directors take advantage of the power of sound by "mickeymousing," a term used when the music in a film noticeably reflects the scene. This technique has been used so frequently that the audience is aware of the musical cues (as in Jaws), giving them an idea of what to expect next.

Leaving no expressive response to chance, directors take advantage of music's power of "connotative meaning," to allow us a subliminal window into the character's

raw feelings, thus "confirming the emotional response of the spectator" and "anchoring meaning" (Rowe 111).

Sound can enhance the mood the director wants to create, or it can add the effect of irony. Many Japanese films rely on the starkness of silence to enhance the tension, thereby dramatically increasing the effect of particular noises. For instance, the sound of static is Sadako/Samara's cue to attack, as well as her farewell signature. *Ringu* and *The Ring* reverberate with static and high-pitched frequency sounds, causing the tension to seem more concentrated.

4.2 The Monster

Though the elements vary from film to film, one figure whose presence is necessary for the horror film to be complete; a figure whose very existence typifies the essence of the genre, a figure that evokes horror as no other creature could: the monster. Whether a blood-sucking vampire, a grotesque demon, or a soulless piece of rotting flesh, the monster is a force to reckon with. "If the iconography of cinema is rich in monsters, this is of course in part an 'innocent' consequence of the desire for spectacle, for that which will overwhelm the tedium of one's regimented twentieth-century life: A monster is, after all, something that is *shown (monstrum)*" (Coates 80).

A monster, however, should not be confused with just any scary antagonist who is capable of heinous murders. The term "monster" requires specific criteria, according to Carroll, who classified these beings as "fictionally confected out of either supernatural lore or science fiction fancy – whose existence contemporary science challenges" (148). In other words, monsters are abnormal creatures whose existence is not commonplace in

everyday human life. This distinction is necessary to separate horror from the fantastical or make-believe, in which monsters constitute a certain normalcy. Another key determinant is that the peril is exaggerated by "revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (53). Carroll bases his observation on the reaction of the other characters to this inexplicable reject of nature; there is "one such monster at minimum" in any true horror film (148).

A looming fear adds to the suspense of the audience, who are meant to identify with the plight of the protagonist. For instance, in *The Ring*, when the body of Rachel's niece is found dead in the closet, cowering in fear and disfigured, the audience is acutely aware that the monster's threat is indeed no urban legend. Again, in *The Ring*, when Noah stares in disbelief at the monstrosity climbing out of the television, it provokes the viewer to do the same. His tremble is our cue to be afraid.

However, we are not scared for the same reasons as the protagonist, because we do not perceive the monster to be real. Rather, we engage in a process Carroll calls the "*thought theory*," which is being afraid of the *idea* of the monster. We understand that the monster is not real, allowing us to enjoy the horror as fiction ("Nature" 56). "One of the most remarkable features of cinema is its capacity for allowing us to attend scenes of violence and yet ourselves receive no hurt" (Coates 79). When we see Samara in front of us, we do not see our fears of rejection or inadequacy; we see a vengeful spirit.

Hence, based on Carroll's specifications, Sadako/Samara qualifies as a monster because a) science denies her existence; b) she is terrifying and unwholesome; c) the other characters "shudder in disbelief, responding to this violation of nature" (53). Based on these same specifications, one can determine that *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasku 2002), a Japanese film where teenagers are taken to a deserted island and forced to participate in

a killing spree, should not be classified as a horror film. While the theme is unwholesome and the methods of killing are terrifying, science does not deny any particular existence. Therefore, though *Battle Royale* has the gore of a horror film, it does not meet Carroll's other criteria for the horror genre.

Paul Coates offers three categories to help distinguish between the various types of monsters in the horror genre. The first category consists of monsters that are "visibly nonhuman," such as aliens, gremlins or some other unexplainable creature. The second category is the "semihuman" monster who "momentarily reveals his extraterritoriality to the human race," such as *Dracula* or *Frankenstein.* Lastly, the third type of monster appears "visually identical with a human being," such as a human rival who functions outside of the norm or someone with special powers (85).

Sadoko/Samara fits the second category, a "monster who yearns for the humanity he finds partly adumbrated in his own form" (Coates 85). This is a plausible description of a child with powerful psychic abilities who lacks the maturity to control them, cruelly attacked and thrown down a well, clawing at the walls for seven days until her human self dies. However, it is not life her vengeful spirit returns to, but a quasi-afterlife state, where her paranormal powers are summoned through viewing a cursed videotape. She resurrects as a virus with the sole purpose of revenge. Though she yearns for humanity and a mother's love, it is within this contagion that she attains true immortality. Coates says that this categorical monster, caught in metamorphosis from "double to monster" reflects the human "longing for self-transcendence" (90). The human species cast their fears upon this halfway hominid to have them dramatized through imagination, transforming them into illogical and inexplicable depictions of life and death. Unable to

accept what we cannot control, we invent a character, a monster, to suggest our inevitable fate through fiction. Other important Japanese films that contain similar monsters are *Onibaba* (Shindo Kaneto 1964), *Kwaidan* (Kobayashi Masaki, 1965), and *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Shimizu Takashi 2002).

4.3 The Narrative

As communication critic Em Griffen notes, "People are storytelling animals" (295). He refers to Walter Fisher's *Narrative Paradigm* (1984), which proposes that the majority of human communication is narrative in nature, meaning we learn to express ourselves to each other through stories. Narrative is a medium for uncertainty reduction in regards to other people, leading to bonds of familiarity, eventual acceptance and security or rejection and alienation based on different experiences of narrative exposure. As Gamarra puts it, "every narrative has a structure and every story-telling relationship (the bond between story-teller and audience) is an organised and communal process that expresses thoughts, emotions, and impulses" (75).

The narrative we choose to tell allows us to re-create the story and make it as factual or fantastical as the situation calls for. For instance, tales dealing with lurid and grave material can be told as documentary, comedy, drama, or horror. Yet, rather than debate genre further, it is more pertinent to investigate how the narrative structure is utilized through the texts and subtexts of horror, culture and sexuality.

"Narrative is a type of containment device for conflicts and tensions" (Gamarra 77). This containment is a human construction that allows us a certain degree of control. In a horror film, the monster is a product of the narrative, and therefore contained, and

controlled, by it. The audience is amused by the fictional possibility that such a creature could exist (Carroll 40). As the horror film is an artistic interpretation of that which humanity cannot understand; it is our attempt to capture fear inside of a narrative through the character of the monster. As Carroll notes, "horror thrives above all as a narrative form. ... The locus of our gratification is not the monster as such but the whole narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged" (34). The horror film is an exploitation of macabre curiosity. Whether various aspects of the social order, internal demons, forces of nature, life forms outside of our planet, the supernatural, or the inexplicable state of death and non-existence of life, these are horrors that the human unconscious interacts with on a daily basis. The monster is the personification of the illogical and grotesque, which the narrative transforms into a logical structure. It is no wonder that a genre that integrates these facets of dark wonder should seem so appealing. As much as the monster is an icon of fear, it is also one of supposition. The possibilities of the inexplicable are reduced through exploration of this narrative. The unknown becomes controllable because the narrator controls the outcome. "That is why, so often, the real drama in a horror story resides in establishing the existence of the monster and in disclosing its horrific properties. Once this is established, the monster, generally, has to be confronted, and the narrative is driven by the question of whether the creature can be destroyed" (35). Thus, we find once again that the relationship between normality and the monster mandates the progression of plot.

While serving as entertainment on the surface, the horror story also provides a haven for egocentric anxieties in the subtext. Wells elaborates upon this notion:

> Simply, all these grand narratives – social alienation, the collapse of spiritual and moral order, a deep crisis of evolutionary identity, the overt articulation of

> humankind's inner-most imperatives, and the need to express the implications of human existence in an appropriate aesthetic – may be viewed as the conditions which underpin contemporary horror texts. (6-7)

The horror narrative allows for a complex layering of plot and underlying principle. The audience is able to identify with the protagonist, but also to empathize to some degree with the monster. One is able to witness the social function of normality, but also view the potential turmoil of its aftermath. Society explores the perspective of the outcast, only to exploit it and demand conformity, thus confirming the horror film's conservative status. Caged anxiety is unleashed for temporary entertainment.

4.4 Sexuality in the Horror Genre

Sexuality expands the narrative, directing the characters toward an amorous interlude or self-discovery. Its inclusion in the horror narrative helps us to separate the protagonist from the antagonist through the confinement of morality. As King notes, "in the horror genre, logic goes a long way toward proving morality" (134). The same is true for underlying subtext of sexuality. The good guy, working as an agent of the status quo, is able to use logic and defeat the bad guy in an ethical manner, and stays inside the bounds of what is acceptable social and sexual behavior.

4.4.1 Women and Gender

"Genitalia seal our fate, for at once we are initiated into the separate cultural constructs that are related to the rearing of male or female children" (Highwater 1). Jamake Highwater refers to sociologist Jeffrey Weekes' idea of sexuality as a human construction that is influenced by society and culture (6). In Western and Eastern societies alike, law dictates what is acceptable behavior, governing the parameters of sexuality. Andrea Dworkin believes this invasion of nature is a direct product of male dominance and patriarchy. "Nature is not, in this sense, trees or weeds or wind. It is gender: what men and women are; what a man is in intercourse, what a woman is in intercourse" (155). Dworkin notes that the laws are set up in such a way that promotes men to maintain the dominant position in society.

"The creation of gender by law was systematic, sophisticated, supremely intelligent; behaviour regulated to produce social conditions of power and powerlessness experienced by the individuals inside the social system as the sexual natures inside them as individuals" (Dworkin 156). Gender has been an underlying theme in horror films for quite a while. Feminist critic Linda Williams has speculated as to what a female's place in a horror film represents. Horror is extremely conscious of the body and sexuality. Through the guise of gender, horror integrates a sexual subtext into the narrative, maximizing the discharge of tension (Carroll and Ward 140).

In her essay "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams examines the woman's place in a horror film. She demonstrates an "affinity between monster and woman" based on the female gaze (62). The woman is forced to take an objective role as she is denied the pleasure of the dominant gaze; "she exists only to be looked at" (61). In

Ringu, Sadako's eye rolls upward. While this is partly in reference to Japanese folklore, there may be a direct correlation to the objectivity of the female gaze. It is a patriarchal figure that denies Sadako her right to exist. She was subject to death since Ikuma deems it necessary. "The woman's gaze is punished, in other words, by narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (Williams 62).

4.4.2 The Final Girl

The *Final Girl* is the lead female in a horror film, who survives until the end of the narrative and finds a way to defeat the monster. She is the heroine who subverts the male-dominated perspective, while still succumbing to certain patriarchal stereotypes. As horror critic Carol J. Clover notes in her essay *Her Body, Himself*:

> The Final Girl is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail.... She is intelligent, watchful and level-headed; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. (79)

The denial of sexuality is also prevalent in the character of the Final Girl, who is typically a virgin. Her repression of sexuality allows her to defeat the monster that, in a psychoanalytic aspect, represents the unleashed unconscious. The presence of sexuality in horror sustains the conservatism of the status quo and justifies the narrative's return to normality.

In the case of *Ringu* and *The Ring*, that character is Reiko/Rachel. While she is clearly not a virgin, her sexuality is non-threatening since she is a mother, though rather self-deprecating when it comes to her maternal skills. Walter Chaw posits: "*The Ring* is a story involved in the archetypal terror and mystery of feminine fertility and reproduction," and the investigative heroine is not only deciphering the clues of a curse, but "poking at the mystery of her own sex and sexuality" (Chaw).

Figure 4.4 Final Girl Comparison.

The Final Girl also possesses several masculine traits, serving to sharpen her instinct for survival. Modestly dressed at all times, she is set apart from other girls through her nondescript gender, allowing the male viewer a sense of identification. (See Figure 4.4). Donato Totaro explains this identification in psychoanalytic terms in her essay, *The Final Girl: A Few Thoughts on Feminism and Horror.* She claims that the Final Girl shifts the Post-Oedipal sadistic male impulse, which is brought about when identification is transferred from the mother to the father, to the Pre-Oedipal, that is more feminine and masochistic in nature, and brought about by a dominating identification with the mother. Victimization becomes stimulating in compliance to the motherly body: "the spectator assumes a submissive position whenever they identify with the female victim, and more importantly, the female heroine (the Final Girl)" (Totaro).

4.5 The Cultural Discourse of Horror

4.5.1 Id, Ego, and Superego

Sigmund Freud devised a strategy to explain the organization of the psyche dividing it into three succinct parts, the id, the ego, and the superego. These terms have been absorbed by mass culture and are frequently misrepresented. In order to explore the horror film in a psychoanalytic context, it is necessary to have an appropriate understanding of their origin and the relationship they share. Freud believed the id to be the oldest of the mental functions, operating similar to instinct (as explained by Fodor and Gaynor 90). It represents the unbridled unconscious (91). The ego serves as an intermediary between the id and the stimuli received from the external world, developing through individual experience (64, 65). The ego is concerned with the events of the present and "has the task of self-preservation" (63). The superego functions as mediator between the id and ego, and synonymous with the idea of the conscience. It is the facet of the ego that replaces parental authority and morality. "It is, actually, the precipitate of the Ego's first attachments to objects; the heir of the Oedipus complex, when that has been evacuated" (Fodor and Gaynor 180).

How exactly, then, do the id, ego and superego relate to the horror genre? As King notes, the horror film, "at its most basic level, is the old conflict between id and superego, the free will to do evil or deny it" (75). The conflict between the two represents the difference between the hero, filled with good intentions, and the monster, which succumbs to evil desires and pursues destruction; perhaps a materialized struggle between the conscious and unconscious. It is a question of structure or complete

unrestricted instinct driving desire and satisfaction. "Naturally, the id knows no values, no good and evil, no morality" (Fodor and Gaynor 91). The free will of humanity is uncertain.

Another similarity between the id and the superego is the influence of the past, which Wells claims is a crucial determinant of the horror genre. The superego is indicative of the past due to its development in early childhood and role as father-substitute (Fodor and Gaynor 181). The id is the incomprehensible portion of the identity that is inherited at birth, the procurator of the unknown, yet suspecting.

The ego is where fear, comedy and sexuality become inextricably related in the horror film. The libido, which is the sexual energy of one's nature, exists primarily in the ego (Fodor and Gaynor 90). Conflicts between the ego and id lead to sexual anxieties, which are initiated early on with the fear of castration and the Oedipal and Electra complexes, which affect sexual development and perception.

"The ego—the part of the psyche that compromises between the demands of the external material world, interior instincts, and somatic needs and desires—uses laughter to shape psychic material" (Gamarra 33). The relationship between the ego and superego complicates the comedic spirit, as the superego determines the guidelines of interaction, drawing attention to that which is taboo. Yet, as Gamara summarizes, comedy is not as inventive if there are no conventions (219). Humor is the 'triumph" of the ego (Fodor and Gaynor 86).

A horror film, in essence, has the same effect on the ego, in the way that it "examines the tension between materiality and imagination" (Wells 34). Perhaps the strongest argument for the psychoanalysis of horror is that, according to Freud, fear

requires an object (Fodor and Gaynor 73). The fictional images in the film are projected onto a screen, yet it is not this object that we fear, but our own awareness of what the characters face: our own intrinsic fears transfigured into the idea of the monster.

4.5.2 The Other

George Herbert Mead, a social theorist who developed Symbolic Interactionism, determined that people assign different meanings to different things and different people, and this influences the way that people communicate and interact with each other. He refers to the term *the looking glass self*, coined by the sociologist Charles Cooley from a Ralph Waldo Emerson poem. This basis of this idea is the consideration of self-image and the standpoint of other people. Meade aptly noted that human beings have the capacity to view life from the perspective of the other, and this capacity is what makes the presence of a monster so threatening (as summarized by Griffen 57-59).

Horror can be seen, according to Robin Wood, as "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilisation represses and oppresses, its emergence dramatised, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter of terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression" (28). In *The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s*, Wood traces the root of the horror film to a direct result of "patriarchal capitalism" and the culmination of dissatisfaction in an alienated society (25). Wood believes the emergence of the monster to be clearly linked to Freud's idea of the Other. This, Wood argues, is demonstrated through the downtrodden of society: the minorities, whose plights range from bisexuality to ethnicity and gender, who are subverted by patriarchal dominion. He lists eight aspects of the Other linking it to

specific repressed groups in society such as ethnic, cultural, political, ageist, and sexual (27-29). Wood summarizes:

> These notions of repression and the Other afford us not merely a means of access but a rudimentary categorization of horror films in social/political terms, distinguishing the progressive from the reactionary, the criterion being the way in which the monster is presented and defined. (29)

When trying to define, or rather portray, monstrosity, Stephen King begins by referring to the outcasts of society: dwarfs, midgets, disfigured individuals, extremely obese individuals, as well as heavily pierced or tattooed people (3). He also lists a number of undesirable physical attributes that are negatively judged by society, such as acne or birthmarks, traits that are deemed unattractive yet can belong to anyone (37-38). "Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us," King reflects (39). Perhaps it is the security of each person's own ethnocentrism that raises suspicion about outside culture. At times, the trait that we despise in other people is the one we are most afraid of in ourselves.

Barbara Creed explores the "monstrous feminine" looking at woman as the abject rather than the object (67). Creed defines the abject by referring to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as " 'the place where meaning collapses' " (69). Essentially, this is exploring the role of the woman as the Other. Creed notes the importance of the role of woman as mother, and the volatile connection that exists between mother and child. "We can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative in the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father

is invariably absent. In these films, the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine" (Creed 72).

One way repression has manifested itself is through "the otherness of children," referring to infantile sexuality, and the transfer of repression from generation to generation (Wells 28). Children begin to learn conformity at an early age, adapting to the rules of the environment that surrounds them. Conformity, in this sense, is the process by which one accepts and participates in popular activities deemed correct by superiors. Throughout time, restrictions are enforced and then lifted due to a younger generation's enlightenment or preference; however, as the maturation process commences, a new behaviour becomes unacceptable, thus replacing the identity of the monstrous other. Perhaps Sadako/Samara represents the lonely child who was unable to integrate into the real world due to a lack of socialization with her parents. The Other can take on any misunderstood or misrepresented group in society, thus unmasking a society's true fears.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Return to the Status Quo

By using Wood's definition of horror: "normality is threatened by the Monster," we are able to understand the horror film on various theoretical and psychoanalytical levels (31). Humanity's horror, comedy and sexuality are linked above all else by the idea of the status quo. "Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (Wood 32). The horror film temporarily releases us from the constraints of civilization, free of guilt, as our viewing requires no moral obligation. Normality is an idea seeming only as real as the fiction, while fantastic scenarios titillate the senses, for as long as the narrative continues.

As horror films tend to be conservative in nature, "they tend to re-establish the order (social, moral, or otherwise) that they symbolically deconstruct" (Arnzen 179). The protagonist realizes the abject in the form of the monster and drives the narrative searching for a method of normalization. Upon this discovery, the film reaches its conclusion, and life returns to the ordinary, yet oblivious, state that once was. Culture masks the ambiguity of alienation, camouflaging perspective with mores and ethnology. The unknown is once again unknowable, though a hint of the Other still remains in the unconscious imagination. Though the narrative may regress in its plausible progressive ideas, it has an impact, nevertheless.

5.2 Human Catharsis

Catharsis provides psychological rejuvenation, though the audience's "awareness stops at the level of plot, action and character" (Wood 28-30). Nora N. Hourani lists a psychological release as one of the benefits to watching horror films. Psychotherapists, she says, "believe the horror films provide psychic relief from internal conflicts by allowing the displacement of anxieties onto story materials" (4). Stephen King speculates: "We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings...and let me further suggest that it is not the physical or mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which these aberrations seem to imply" (39).

Hence, the absurd ideas generated in a horror film can be seen as the result of a mass collective unconscious, and a mere parody of the negative sensations one experiences in the reality of life. However, due to a lack of awareness, the viewer is able to sit back and enjoy the plot as fiction, under the guise of Carroll's "*thought theory*," which I have previously described.

Paul Wells, author of *The Horror Genre*, suggests: "The history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century" (3). He lists industry, technology and economic determinism as significant factors in the shift of moral, ethical and socio-political ways of life (3). This is true in the West, as well as in Japan. The horror film not only transforms our unconscious frustrations into fantastical yet imminently dangerous images that thrill and entertain, distracting our attention from the very reality that has created them; it also provides human catharsis that, just like Sadako/Samara, is not bound by borders.

Humanity, however, has always had an outlet for nonconformist creativity. The view of the society's outcasts, whether Eastern or Western, is synonymous with that of the monster's perspective. Wood summarizes: "It is repression, in other words, that makes impossible the healthy alternative – the full recognition and acceptance of the Other's autonomy and right to exist" (27).

It is the "actual dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed, the Other, in the figure of the Monster," triggering our subconscious fantasies (Wells 28-30). The horror film unconsciously links humanity through primal desires toward aggression, fear of the unknown, and ultimately, each individual's own mortality.

As Stephen King observes, the horror film is an invitation to indulge in our primitive fantasies, without abandon or guilt. Above all, we must remember, horror is fantasy. It is a celebrative masquerade of the macabre, a dramatic interpretation about the possibilities of death. Death is an end to life as humanity understands it, and the inconclusive information beckons our imagination to ponder what the tumultuous exit might be like. However, due to cinematic tradition, a horror film about an old man dying in his sleep would not sell tickets and could prove anti-climactic, as it is expected and predictable. It is too close to the reality that we all hope for. Yet the unpredictability of murder or a premature ending is enticing to watch, especially when it is happening to a fictional other, but is still close enough to scare. This is the essence of horror.

5.3 J-Horror and Communication

While *Ringu* and *The Ring* reflect cultural differences, the meaning communicated is still very much the same. Though there is a wide spectrum of symbolic information to shuffle through to understand the intended message, the message is ultimately about being human and living in this big and changing world. Perhaps J-Horror has become so successful due to the similarities of our contemporary world rather than the differences of our past. With all the advances in technology and media, and the continued human dependence upon them, life in the twenty-first century is fascinating on one level, and yet somewhat cold and impersonal on another. "Moreover, whether that which is sublimated and/or temporarily contained takes the form of a potentially nation-effacing globalism, or the increasingly important role of women who 'manage the home,' horror cinema marks the ideal forum for the metaphoric expression of concerns over an indiscrete (or hybrid) national, social or corporeal body" (McRoy 178).

Japan's devastation after the World War II forced an abandonment of national identity. Reconstruction came at a price: assimilating ancient traditions with the industrial capitalist notions of the West. However, Japanese directors have been able to pick up where American directors left off. "As so often happens in cultural history, a tradition's legacy has been inherited and amplified by another society" (McRoy xii). Perhaps the horror film works so well as a means of transcultural communication due to each culture's familiarity with the genre.

By allowing us to glimpse death and the inevitable through a fantastical lens, J-Horror makes us more fully aware of life. The horror genre becomes more aware of itself and advantageously plays with the benefits of familiarity. Horror "attempts to confuse

the audience, to the point where we question the differences between reality and fiction. The potential for the horrific acts seen on the screen to creep into everyday life seems to be greater than ever before, or at least, that is what the horror film is trying to convince its audience" (Kinal 71).

Perhaps Sadako/Samara is not just trying to warn us about the dangers of technology and multimedia, but rather, the importance of communication across all boundaries. For it is the human ability to communicate that allows our species to establish civilized societies and produce technology that "exhibits the universalizing tendency" (Hardison 142). Yet, the universalizing power that technology has given us may be premature, as humanity is not yet able to coexist peacefully in the universe we share. Images of war and violence flash across the television screens and Internet windows, updated every few seconds. Tragedy created by bureaucratic, religious and ethnic differences fuel the bloodshed that dominates the headline news. We can witness catastrophe through a high-definition screen, a simulacrum of experience, untouched but still affected. The bombardment of information forces us to realize the cultural disparity of people all over the world who view life in drastically different ways, again provoking the question, how different are we really? Perhaps a better question with a more tangible answer would be "What are the commonalities upon which we can build?"

"In a contemporary world where there are few shared and common knowledges, the nursery rhyme, the fairytale, and the folktale, and their contemporary counterpart, the horror movie, still provide a context in which everyone shares the same language" (Wells 108).

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